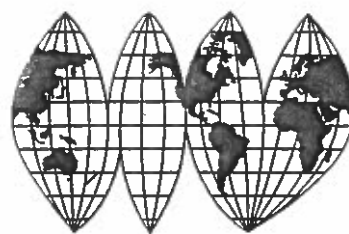


32. The Modern Middle East



TEACHER BACKGROUND

The Middle East is a complex tangle of conflicts. These are not just low-intensity struggles. Some of these wars have involved the biggest tank battles since the Second World War. There have been six such wars since 1945, and several civil wars. Such instability in a region would be alarming enough, but the Middle East supplies a significant portion of the world's oil. Violence in the Middle East has an impact on the world's oil supply.

The Middle East has roughly two thirds of the world's proven oil reserves. Proven oil reserve is oil in the ground, still down there to be pumped. Saudi Arabia has the most, with roughly 260 billion barrels. Iraq is second with about 100 billion barrels. Three other Middle Eastern states, Kuwait, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates, have over 90 million barrels of proven oil reserves. For comparison, North America, including Canada, the United States, and Mexico, has a total proven oil reserve of 80 billion barrels. This is the second biggest reserve after the Middle East.

The Middle East sells oil to Japan, Western Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, and some other countries. Oil is a vital commodity to each of these buyers. Since oil is often the most important export, the price of oil is a major concern to the Middle Eastern countries. OPEC, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, has most of its members in the Middle East. OPEC membership includes Algeria, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Gabon, Indonesia, Iran, Nigeria, and Venezuela. The members have a variety of perspectives, but they try to control production to maintain stable prices.

Transporting oil is itself a major business in the Middle East. Pipelines cross the area, passing through some countries that are not major producers themselves. There is a pipeline from Saudi Arabia through Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon to the eastern Mediterranean Sea. There is one from Iraq through Turkey to the eastern Mediterranean. Each producing country has its internal pipelines taking oil to ports or refineries. The waters around the Middle East are major oil transport routes. The Strait of Hormuz at the mouth of the Persian Gulf has about a quarter of the world's oil passing through it. Some oil going to Europe from the Persian Gulf is shipped through the Red Sea and Suez Canal into the Mediterranean. These pipelines and waterways are vital supply lines to major oil importers.

For such a vital area, there has a dramatic number of wars have been. Israel has been involved in four, by conservative count. Israel is a Jewish state, and Arab peoples in the area have resisted it. Details of that story are on another map (Chapter 33). Much of the area is Arab, including Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, United Arab Emirates, and Oman. Even Iran, which is Persian, is hostile to Israel. Turkey is a non-Arab country also. But the Arabs, Iranians, and Turks are mostly followers of Islam.

Saudi Arabia is the guardian of the holy city of Mecca. Muslims are expected to make a pilgrimage to Mecca once in their lifetime. The Saudi government enforces rigid Islamic practice. Businesses and government offices close for prayers each day. Women must wear clothing covering their body and head when in public. The rules are enforced by religious police. Other

governments vary in the strictness of their enforcement of Islamic practices. Turkey makes a point that their people dress in modern European style—no veiled women for them. Islam is also divided into Shiite and Suni. Shiite Muslims are a majority in Iran and a minority in some other countries, notably Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Some of the more secular-minded governments are facing threats from Muslim fundamentalists.

The biggest conflict in the Middle East before the Gulf War was the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–1988. The war was fought along the common border and focused near the Persian Gulf. It seems the war became a stalemate, but in the process, casualties ran into the millions.

Iraq again moved on a neighboring country on August 1, 1990, when 100,000 Iraqi troops crossed the border into Kuwait. This attack alarmed the world because of the oil involved and the possibility that Iraq might move on to invade Saudi Arabia. Quickly, President George Bush of the United States moved to protect Saudi Arabia and liberate Kuwait. Eventually the effort known as the Gulf War involved a coalition fighting against Iraq. There was a massive air campaign and then a 100-hour land battle. After that, Iraq asked for a cease-fire. Since then, Iraq has continued to try to get around the United Nations sanctions and to fool United Nations inspectors.

But this is just the most recent and most dramatic of the conflicts in the Middle East. There are others. Cyprus has been divided since the 1960's by a civil war between Greek and

Turkish settlers. Lebanon had a civil war between its Christians and Muslims that also brought in the Palestinian Liberation Organization, Israel, Syria, the United States Marines, and French troops. Iran's current government is the result of a revolution that drove out its shah. Iran was widely seen as the more threatening power during the Iran-Iraq War. Afghanistan had Soviet troops in it from 1979–1986 and still has fighting going on internally.

In two languages of the Middle East, the word of greeting is "peace": *shalom* in Hebrew and *salaam* in Arabic. Perhaps it is such a common greeting because the thing itself is so rare.